Newspapers by ancestry
https://www.newspapers.com/image/425988010

Downloaded on Mar 27, 2024

THE TWO PAT METHENYS

The guitarist balances risk with carefree melodies, to the chagrin of a few and the delight of many

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

The boyish, toothsome smile seems eternal in Pat Metheny. With his patented shock of hair (recently dyed), bare feet, faded jeans and French-sailor blue and white striped jersey, he has always looked more like a beachcomber than a jazz musician.

Hard to believe, then, that last year Metheny quietly turned 50, and that he has been a defining musical figure for over 30 of those years. When he arrived in the mid-1970s – a time when formulaic sludge passed itself off as jazz-rock – his dulcet sounds were a proverbial breath of fresh air. And so he has been personally, remaining as accessible as he is all-embracing, despite baring his fangs at Kenny G a few years ago.

This year Metheny returns to renew his love affair with the Montreal International Jazz Festival, an affair that has permeated the festival's spirit even in his absence. In six scheduled concerts, he will revisit key moments in his career, but with his customary forward-looking approach.

They include his local debut in 1974 (at the old In Concert Club in Old Montreal) – fresh out of Boston's Berklee conservatory, where at 18 he became its youngest teacher – as a member of vibraphonist Gary Burton's group alongside another guitarist, Mick Goodrick. (One of Metheny's festival shows is a reunion with Burton.) A year later, he was back with his own group and the link with Montreal's enthusiastic audiences was cemented.

In 1988 he performed at no less than eight festival shows (and was a daunting figure in jams throughout town), climaxing with an outdoor concert at the foot of McGill College Ave. that attracted a crowd of 150,000, stretching through the campus and up the mountain. He crowned Montreal "the best jazz festival in the world," a big deal in only its ninth edition.

Similarly, his last whirl about town, in 1997, included a furiously sweaty gig at Club Soda with great bop drummer Roy Haynes and bassist Dave Holland.

Critics have always wondered who the "real" Metheny is: the fleet-footed improviser who has issued challenging records with heavies like Ornette Coleman and Derek Bailey, or the carefree melodist with a penchant for layer upon layer of smooth sounds that seem designed for supermarkets and elevators? A question to which Metheny would perhaps smile and wryly quip, "That's show business!"

Metheny has been virtually ignored by some jazz journalists, as if his music didn't qualify for discussion.

Yet his playing carries unmistakable echoes of the elegance of trumpeter Clifford Brown, the economy of guitarist Jim Hall, the soaring vocalise of Milton Nascimento and the sophistication of Antonio Carlos Jobim.

A clue to the breadth and airiness of his style comes in this auto-portrait from Beyond the Missouri Sky (Short Stories) – his duet album with Charlie Haden – in which he recalls growing up in the small town of Lee's Summit: "Missouri. For me, as a kid growing up there, it was a place to dream. A place to sit out in the backyard and consider the possibilities of life and music while practising as many hours as I could stay awake, staring out into those vast, Midwestern spaces. But as much as I loved it there, it was also filled with a restlessness and curiosity about the whole world that I knew existed beyond that Missouri sky."

Since those formative days, the man has been a road hound, giving up to 300 shows per year, in an era when the market for jazz virtuosity – as opposed to singing, fusion and world music – has shrunk.

Metheny started playing trumpet at age 8, switched to guitar four years later, and began gigging at 14 in Kansas City. Like that city's most famous musician, Charlie Parker, he arrived with an instantly recognizable sound, which jazz historian Ted Gioia called a "refined and lucid, melodic style that ranks as the most incisive approach to the electric guitar since Wes Montgomery." Like Parker on saxophone, his effect on guitarists has been incalculable.

Yet he was virtually ignored by Ken Burns's Jazz series (he had company here), and by such pooh-bahs of jazz journalism as Gary Giddens and Whitney Balliett, as if his music didn't qualify for discussion. Somehow the guy with the smiley face just doesn't fit the image of a driven jazz musician. That strikes at the heart of the popularity vs. creativity conundrum.

In The History of Jazz (1997), Gioia maintains Metheny's fusion albums "are highly original projects that sound deceptively simple, yet include some of the most sophisticated jazz writing of the late 1980s and early 1990s." And Alyn Shipton, in A New History of Jazz (2001), admits that "although much of his output is very accessible, he has remained a jazz musician through and through."

The dissenting view is summed up by veteran arbiters Richard Cook and Brian Morton in The Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD. By 1984's First Circle, Metheny "seemed to be meditating his group's music through a fundamentally conservative synthesis of jazz, Latin and rock flavours; a catholic taste put through a blender to take all the harmful pieces out."

And yet, as they admit, he followed with a deeply probing album with free-jazz icon Ornette Coleman (Song X). Following commercial favour with risk-taking settings became a pattern – the Metheny Syndrome that infuriates many but is embraced by even more.

His 1992 solo, multi-tracked breakup opus Secret Story was, according to Cook and Morton, "hopelessly overblown and would feel intolerably pompous were Metheny himself not so likeable." Indeed, it seemed incongruous that this mild-mannered guy, who has recorded his share of easy-listening music, singled out Kenny G's soporifics in an infamous outburst five years ago. The controversy began when he advised an audience of children for a Polish TV special not to get confused "by the sometimes overwhelming volume of music that falls under the jazz umbrella," adding that "Kenny G plays the dumbest music on the planet – something that all 8- to 11-year-old kids on the planet already intrinsically know."

Later asked to explain himself on his official Web site, Metheny assailed G's electronically engineered duet with Louis Armstrong on What a Wonderful World in 1988, calling it "musical necrophilia." Kenny G's disrespect, he continued, was "a new low point in modern culture – something that we all should be totally embarrassed about – and afraid of."

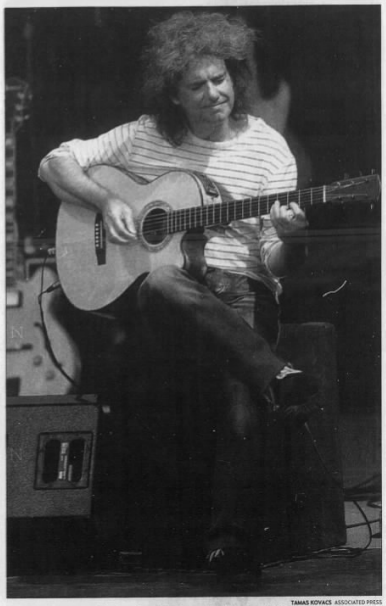
While the debate over popularity vs. creativity will probably always follow Metheny's touring group, many of his most incandescent moments have been in trio settings, starting with his 1975 debut, Bright Size Life.

"One thing that's cool about a guitar trio is it's a blank slate," he told Guitar Player magazine in 2001. "There aren't a lot of archetypes to say, 'OK, this is how you do it.' That was particularly true when I started playing in the late '60s. You could almost count the trio records that existed then – Kenny Burrell's Man at Work, one Grant Green record, and a couple of Jim Hall records. It was open territory."

His festival trio date is with Antonio Sanchez, his group's latest drummer, and bassist Scott Colley, who has anchored his own Jim Hall. Metheny shared the stage with Hall for the first time in 1981 when, as Hall related to Francis Davis in the 2004 book Jazz and Its Discontents, some of Metheny's fans were wondering who he was – as in, "God, he looks like my father!" He elaborated: "It was a very emotional experience, almost like a father-and-son reunion, although Pat and I had never met before."

Hall was flabbergasted by his arsenal of pedals and equipment, but in the end it all comes down to touch, and Metheny's got it. Even if he does hold his guitar pick backwards. Why? Because growing up in tiny Lee's Summit, he could only get under 78rpm and he "couldn't stand the way those picks sounded, so I learned to hold them backwards – with the round edge towards the strings – and to bend the edge a little between my thumb and two fingers," he told Guitar Player in 2001. "That made the thin pick sound more like a medium."

Pat Metheny performs in a trio (with Antonio Sanchez and Scott Colley) July 5 at 8 p.m. at the Spectrum ($46.50); with friends including David Sanchez, Enrico Rava and Michel Ndegeocello July 6 at 9:30 p.m. at the Spectrum ($52.50); with Charlie Haden July 7 at 6 p.m. at Théâtre Maisonneuve of Place des Arts ($44.50 to $64.50); a reunion with Gary Burton and Steve Swallow July 8 at 6 p.m. at Théâtre Maisonneuve of Place des Arts ($44.50 to $64.50); with Mick Goodrick and Dewey Redman July 8 at 10:30 p.m. at Salles du Gesù ($42.50); and at a free show with the Pat Metheny Group July 10 at 9 p.m. on the General Motors Stage.



TAMAS KOVACS ASSOCIATED PRESS

Pat Metheny has composed his share of easy-listening music, but there's no mistaking the elegance in his work.

Key entries in Metheny's discography, from smiley-faced fusion to jazz concertos

1975: **Bright Size Life (ECM).** A little pearl in the overblown jazz-rock era, full of gentle collisions and counterpoints with 24-year-old bass phenom Jaco Pastorius (beautifully understated here) and pi-quant Bob Moses, the drummer with Gary Burton at the time.

1977: **Watercolors (ECM).** The introduction of Metheny's career-long collaborator, pianist/keyboardist Lyle Mays. Sweetly lyrical tunes with pastel impressionist shades of sound.

1978: **Pat Metheny Group (ECM).** The clarion call of California diving music (San Lorenzo) in a shimmering group sound, as Metheny's sunny style trips the light fantastic. Fusion with a smiley face.

1979: **New Chautauqua (ECM).** Solo guitars with tasteful overdubs, rustic and cosmic.

1980: **80/81 (ECM).** With bassist Charlie Haden, saxophonist Dewey Redman, drummer Jack DeJohnette (all Keith Jarrett survivors) and tenor player Michael Brecker, this all-star summit shed all doubts (prompted by his group success) that he could play with the heavyhitters.

1980: **As Falls Wichita, So Falls Wichita Falls (ECM).** A sprawling, symphonic studio adventure with Mays, blending styles as smooth as Cool Whip. Presaged soundtrack-style electronica wallpaper with haunting sound effects (like children playing).

1983: **Rejoicing (ECM).** Playing Ornette Coleman tunes with the latter's original classic-avant '50s rhythm section (Haden and Billy Higgins), while blending his own modernisms, is no small feat. His open ear is the key.

1985: **Song X (Geffen).** With Ornette himself on alto sax, this came as a shock to those lulled by Metheny's lyrical style. But the guitarist never hid his admiration for free-jazz giant Coleman – both happen to be melodists at heart. A bracing classic.

1987: **Still Life (Talking) (Geffen).** His group debut with Geffen marked a wide-angle turn to a larger, textured sound, accenting Brazilian rhythms. Brighter and more panoramic (in the world-music sense) than anything he'd done previously.

1989: **Question and Answer (Geffen).** Snaps, crackles and pops, with ageless bop drummer Roy Haynes and bassist Dave Holland. A superb jaunt, beautifully recorded.

1992: **Secret Story (Geffen).** Reviled by critics but loved by fans, with its postcard emotion (even down to the road-inspired cover art) indulging in the end of a love affair.

1994: **John Scofield, I Can See Your House from Here (Blue Note) and Joshua Redman, Wish (Warner Bros.).** Metheny happy to be a sideman.

1997: **Beyond the Missouri Sky (with Charlie Haden) (Verve).** One of the perfect middle-of-the-road albums, steeped in folk and pop traditions of these fellow small-town Missouri natives.

1998: **Jim Hall & Pat Metheny (Telarc).** The quintessential professor of electric guitar – as economical as he's quietly daring – with his prime student, combining for a fine-brocade sound mesh.

1999: **Trio 99-00 (Warner Bros.).** With nimbly elegant bassist Larry Grenadier (of Brad Mehldau's trio) and the wide palette of drummer Bill Stewart, a high level of technique is matched by fleet economy and – Metheny's perennial quality – grace under fire. The version of Coltrane's Giant Steps is reverent, yet breathes lightly.

2000: **Trio Live (Warner Bros.).** A double CD that really stretches out, with a variety of intimately explored sounds.

2005: **The Way Up (Nonesuch).** A nonstop, 68-minute jazz concerto that's as light on its feet (in the way Henry Mancini was) as it is ambitious.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Jazz is change, Metheny says

Highlights from Metheny's keynote address to the 2001 International Association of Jazz Educators convention:

"It is jazz's very nature to change, to develop and adapt to the circumstances of its environment." The proof, he says, is the "incredible diversity" of music and musicians "under the wide umbrella of the word 'jazz' itself from the very beginning."

"Jazz is an idea that is more powerful than the details of its history ... We are on the verge of entering a world where the potential for communication itself is about to explode beyond almost anything we can even imagine, and jazz is about nothing if not the essence of communication."

Jazz, he says, has been broadening stylistically since its inception. "The globalization of the music is now fully under way," and with it comes the chance to tune in to "one of the great beauties" of the form – "jazz's almost unlimited capacity to allow human beings to find out things about themselves and the culture that they live in through the process of reconciling their own personal experiences with the experiences of others through the blessing of improvisational and organizational inspiration in sound."

Jazz has always been a "very serious and sophisticated folk music," with a tradition of musicians using "all the materials, all the sounds and moves and vibes and spirits of their time in a musical way." Attempts to make jazz more like classical music "with a defined set of rules and regulations and boundaries and qualities" make him uneasy since "the basic desire for self-expression" is "such a primary presence in the fabric of what makes 'jazz' jazz, that it is crazy to not take advantage of that fact by relegating it to some predetermined model of supposed authenticity."

What excites Metheny is the notion "of a kind of jazz that sounds nothing like the jazz of the 20th century, that is an entirely different thing, a new kind of animal; but one that is still unmistakably connected to the larger jazz tradition."

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Copyright © 2024 Newspapers.com. All Rights Reserved.
Powered by Newspapers.com